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The Unequal Professional Dialogue:
American Civil-Military Relations and the Professional Military Ethic

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**The Unequal Professional Dialogue:
American Civil-Military Relations
and the Professional Military Ethic**

Donald B. Connelly, Ph.D.

INTRODUCTION

In his book *Supreme Command*, Professor Eliot Cohen coined the term the "Unequal Dialogue" by which he meant the conversation between political leaders and generals that needed to be candid, and sometimes even offensively blunt, yet remained always unequal, or forever resting on the final and unambiguous authority of the political leader. Over the past several decades the purpose, rules, limits, and even legitimacy of the "unequal dialogue" between soldiers and civilians have been challenged. Some critics have accused civilians of ignoring military advice. Others have accused the military of not rendering candid advice--of being "yes men." Still others have argued that generals should have professional autonomy or a virtual veto over certain decisions that affect the military.

Unequal relations and communications are an inherent fact of military life, so why have "unequal dialogues" between politicians and soldiers produced so much conflict and confusion? This paper will argue that the "unequal dialogue" is not simply a peculiar characteristic of civil-military relations, but a central feature of the military's professional ethic. Furthermore, the principles and practices, the obligations and limitations of the professional dialogue within the military apply directly to how we engage with both political leaders and the larger society.

In exploring this subject, I will first explain Professor Cohen's concept of the "unequal dialogue" and how it also applies to the unequal dialogue within the military professional. I will then make use of some recent examples, primarily related to Iraq surge decision-making process, to illustrate some of the ethical aspects in both the civil-military and internal military dialogue.

Finally, I will suggest some basic, though by no means comprehensive, principles for the various "unequal dialogues" of the military professional.¹

Two Dialogues

Before I begin my analysis, let me begin with two illustrative examples of unequal dialogues.

In the years after the invasion of Iraq, Colin Powell has described how he spent two and a half hours attempting to talk President Bush out of the decision to invade. Yet, in his book, *Plan of Attack*, Bob Woodward's more contemporaneous account suggests something more complicated. According to Woodward, Powell, "the 'Reluctant Warrior' was urging restraint, but he had not tossed his heart on the table." "He had not said, 'Don't do it.'" Woodward goes on to explain that in his years in the military, Powell, "had learned to play the boss and talk only within the confines of the preliminary goals set by the boss." Either Powell or Woodward concludes, "Perhaps he had been too timid." In recounting George Bush's memory of the meeting, Woodward describes how the president believed that Powell was talking about tactics, the difficulties and the need for allies, rather than the strategy and the decision to go to war.²

In his book, *Vietnam at War*, Phillip Davidson describes how in 1954 before the ill-fated operation at Dienbienphu, the battlefield commander, General René Cogne began to have doubts about the operation that he himself had originally proposed. Rather than send to General Henri Navarre, the theater commander, the hard-hitting analysis written by his staff, Cogne delivered a more careful, equivocal memorandum. This memo raised some of the problems, but did not

¹ Two cautions. I am a historian and a former military officer, not an ethicist. My approach to the Professional Military Ethic (PME) will be more discursive and illustrative rather than systematic. In addition, I will be using examples primarily from published, but largely journalistic sources. In writing the "first draft" history, journalists do not generally have the advantages of voluminous written documents, multiple personal memoirs and reflections, and the perspective of history. I do not claim that these stories are true in all their particulars. However, I believe them sufficiently representative to illustrate the question of the unequal professional dialogue.

² Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, 151-2.

seriously challenge the wisdom of the operation. Apparently, Cogny's staff sneered at their boss's "straddle." The book's author, a retired U.S. Army major general, shrewdly observed that staff officers are usually "blunter and bolder" than their principals because they stand protected behind their leader and will not directly bear the repercussions of an unwelcome recommendation or failure.³

I think these two brief examples capture some of the complexities of the "unequal dialogue." Whether advising civilian or military superiors, it is very difficult for military officers to challenge the boss, especially on his objectives. However, such indirect methods such as "playing the boss" or "straddling" does not achieve the candor or clarity needed when vital matters are at stake. One can also sense that both Powell and Cogny were hampered by their own doubts and uncertainties. On the other hand, we can contrast their hesitation and diffidence with the confidence and conviction of staff officers. Of special significance for the formulation of strategy, is the willingness of military officers to question objectives issued by superiors. This goes against most of their experience and training. One normally regards the objectives issued by higher headquarters as fixed and it is the ways and the means that are in play. Yet, if strategy is about balancing ends, ways, and means, then the suitability or affordability of the ends must be considered. Thus, a subordinate must sometimes challenge the value of the objectives.

COHEN'S "UNEQUAL DIALOGUE"

With that preamble, let me turn to Eliot Cohen's concept of the "Unequal Dialogue." In his book, Professor Cohen advocated an aggressive and sometimes intrusive role for civilian leaders in the planning and conduct of war. While acknowledging that a political leader seldom directly disregards military advice, Cohen observed "a politician finds himself managing military

³ Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History 1946-1975*, 181-82.

alliances, deciding the nature of acceptable risk, shaping operational choices, and reconstructing military organizations."⁴

There are three principal reasons for this "selective meddling." First, war is profoundly political. Hence, political leaders are often more experienced or more qualified to make political assessments, and ultimately they are the ones politically accountable for the decisions. The second reason for active or intrusive involvement in military issues is because generals and admirals frequently disagree. The political leader must sometimes arbitrate these disagreements. He must ultimately decide which course of action is best. The final reason Cohen offers is that the senior officer may not be the best advisor for the specific circumstances or the particular war. Military officers are shaped by their training and experiences. The qualities needed for peacetime generalship may not fully transfer to war. Cohen also observed that military experience is often highly specific and conditional. An officer's experience in a certain kind of war does not necessarily translate into expertise in another type of warfare. Thus, a primary duty of the political leader is to select the proper military leaders.⁵

While Cohen stresses the unequal nature of the dialogue, he also embraces the mutually candid and occasionally sharp character of the dialogue. The building of trust and confidence between civilian and military leaders cannot rely on formalities and false comity. As Cohen observed, "A bland pleasantness in civil-military relations may also mean civilians are evading their responsibilities or that soldiers have succumbed to the courtier mentality rather than that true harmony exists."⁶

The "Normal" Theory of Civil-Military Relations

⁴ Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime*, 208, 10.

⁵ For example, the combat experience of Westmoreland and Abrams in World War II did not prepare them for Vietnam and the experience of Powell and Schwarzkopf in Vietnam was not directly translated into expertise about conducting Desert Storm.

⁶ Eliot A. Cohen, "Supreme Command in the 21st Century," *Joint Forces Quarterly* (Summer 2002), 51.

Cohen contrasts his theory of civil-military relations with what he terms the "normal theory" of civil-military relations. This theory assumes a rather clear cut division of labor and authority between general and statesmen. The statesman decides on the strategic objectives and the general resources and then turns over the conduct of the military operations to the generals. This theory has its theoretical origins in Samuel P. Huntington's *The Soldier and the State*. However, I submit that the moment the military became self-consciously professional they embraced what is really a claim to professional jurisdiction.

It is in the nature of professions to establish jurisdictional boundaries; to claim, "This is my area of responsibility and authority." As Cohen and many other commentators on Huntington's theory contend, the basic problem with this division of labor is that in the real world political and military domains are very blurred and the boundary, to the extent that one is ever agreed upon, is constantly changing. While especially true at the strategic level, we have seen that the spheres blur at the operational and tactical levels as well.

While it is not surprising that many military professionals prefer these separate spheres of authority, many politicians also embrace this jurisdictional boundary. In 1951, Senator Robert Taft and other Republicans castigated President Truman for not following the professional military advice of U.S. theater commander, Douglas MacArthur. In 1999 Senator Gordon Smith lamented the "degree to which political considerations affected NATO's military strategy" in the Kosovo War.⁷ Still more recently, many Democratic and Republican political leaders accused the Bush administration of ignoring professional military advice on Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2007, civil-military theorist Michael Desch demonstrated that the "normal theory" was alive and well when he recommended in his article, "Bush and the Generals":

⁷ Eliot A. Cohen, "Supreme Command in the 21st Century," *Joint Forces Quarterly* (Summer 2002), 206.

"The best solution is to return to an old division of labor: civilians give due deference to military professional advice in the tactical and operational realms in return for complete military subordination in the grand strategic and political realms."⁸

Peter Feaver has recently argued that the academic debate has produced broad camps, the "professional supremacists" and the "civilian supremacists." The first group argues in support of a military sphere of authority unhampered by political meddling and micro-management. In addition to Desch, Feaver includes in this group: Samuel Huntington, Dale Herspring, and military officers, Colonel Chris Gibson, and Lieutenant Colonel Paul Yingling. In the "civilian supremacist" camp which argues that the military should participate in policy matters only within the chain of command and only in private. They acknowledge that military officers must respond truthfully and candidly to Congress. Members of this group are Eliot Cohen, Richard Kohn, Mackubin Owens, and Peter Feaver.⁹

Perhaps, Dr. Feaver is being a bit puckish in his two groupings. Certainly it is not surprising to find Huntington and two military officers in a category that advocates a high degree of military autonomy. However, Michael Desch and Dale Herspring would reject the label of "military supremacist." Yet both denounced the Bush administration for supposedly ignoring military advice. I suspect Feaver was chiding Desch, Herspring and other Bush critics as favoring a more partisan form of civilian control –control of the military only by civilians who agree with them.

Civil-Military Factions

Political partisanship has been part of most civil-military clashes. Civil-military conflict in American history is seldom simply a matter of civilians versus the military. Far more

⁸ Michael C. Desch, "Bush and the Generals, *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2007.

⁹ Peter D. Feaver, "The Right to Be Right: Civil-Military Relations and the Surge," Paper prepared for the International Studies Association Conference, February 2010, version 9, 7-13.

commonly, it is a conflict between one faction of civilians and soldiers versus another civil-military faction. In the famous Truman-MacArthur controversy mentioned earlier, we see Generals Bradley and Marshall supporting President Truman against General MacArthur who had the support of the Republicans in Congress. Most budget battles follow this pattern, and while the military may be considered an interest group, their real power exists in alliance with other civilian interest groups. In American history, the central question has never been whether to have civilian control over the military, but rather, which civilians, and which military advisors, will have a say in the formulation and execution of policy.

The decisions on Iraq reflect this pattern with many different civil-military factions arguing for different policies and courses of action. The conventional media narrative reflected in the Desch and Herspring accounts pitted neoconservative ideologues, with the acquiescence of spineless courtier generals, against the nearly unanimous advice of military professionals in both the planning and the conduct of OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF). I think this narrative tends to ignore both the diversity and ambiguity of the internal debates. It also glosses over the extent to which some of the military “dissent” seems to have involved objections to the political objectives which were well beyond the purview of the military. I agree with Peter Fever’s assessment that the problems in Iraq were not the result of inadequate political “deference to military experts,” nor the “dereliction of generals in not more forcefully thwarting civilian leaders,” but to mutual civilian and military mistakes and misjudgments.¹⁰

Ironically, I believe that the most fateful decisions in the initial phases of the war in Iraq were based more on a long standing agreement between the political and military leadership that the military should not play a leading role in nation-building. I would further submit that

¹⁰ Peter D. Fever, "The Right to Be Right: Civil-Military Relations and the Surge," Paper prepared for the International Studies Association Conference, February 2010, version 9, 52.

between summer of 2004 and 2006 there was a high level of agreement between President Bush, Secretary Rumsfeld, and the military chain of command, down to the operational level, in keeping what might be termed a small military footprint in Iraq. Nevertheless, by the end of the summer of 2003, the American military found itself in a different war, a war for which it was doctrinally and temperamentally ill-prepared.¹¹

The Unequal Professional Dialogue

My purpose is not the review the decisions to invade Iraq, to reiterate Cohen's rationale for the "unequal dialogue: war is political, generals disagree, and military experience is not always relevant to the current situation. Moreover, I argue that these factors also apply to the "unequal dialogue" within the military profession. Politics not only dominates strategy, it pervades nearly all aspects of war, especially irregular war. Just as generals often disagree when offering military advice to political leaders, within professional circles generals (and colonels, captains, and sergeants) often disagree. Finally, military expertise and experience are often highly specific and no officer can be an expert in everything aspect of the profession.

The political dimension of the military profession is too often ignored. Most military officers express distaste for politics and pretend that it can be separated from military life. Yet, politics not only permeates war it permeates everything. Politics, broadly defined, is how organizations make decisions. In rejecting politics, most officers mean party politics that seeks special or partisan advantage at the expense of "the public good." There is a certain cognitive dissonance when officers reject the messiness of politics, yet intrinsically know that interests and factions play a part in their own organizations and decision-making processes. Military

¹¹ This is not to suggest there was no disagreement. Perhaps the greatest dispute was between Secretary Rumsfeld and the Army and Marine Corps over a permanent expansion of end strength. Meanwhile in Iraq, Rumsfeld, Abizaid, and Casey all agreed that a relatively small U.S. military footprint and the priority of rebuilding the Iraqi security forces.

specialties, branches, and services constitute our version of tribes, clans, and parties. For the professional military ethic this means reconciling the special interests of the various tribes and factions with public or national security interests.

Moreover, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have provided the American military an extraordinary political education. Many junior officers found themselves assuming the responsibilities of civil authorities in Afghanistan, and especially Iraq. They have been called upon to negotiate with or arbitrate among various factions. Military officers have been heavily involved in providing public services, building public projects, and organizing government ministries. While the military has generally preferred to call these things cultural education or stability operations, this is politics at its most elemental level. With this in mind, I believe military officers require a greater understanding of politics, and especially comparative politics. They need to appreciate how individuals, groups, and institutions interact in forming civil society and civil governments. Some need to know the practicalities of local and intermediate level government.

In the interest of brevity and, perhaps, clarity, let me combine Cohen's two other factors: managing professional disagreement and the specificity (or limits) of military experience and expertise. Generals, colonels, captains, disagree because they have differing experiences and expertise. What is often termed inter-service rivalry, assumes this kind of basic divergence of viewpoints. The soldier and the airman generally have very different visions of war and the kinds of wars they prefer to fight. Moreover, a soldier's specific military experiences shape his attitude and ideas on war. For example, Matthew Ridgway's airborne infantry experiences in World War II better prepared him for the desperate battles with the Chinese armies in Korea in 1951 than did his predecessor Walton Walker, who had been Patton's armored spearhead. Many

commentators have remarked that the Army's operations in Vietnam tended to conform to its experiences in World War II and Korea rather than the unique circumstances of Vietnam.

Paradoxically, the military's difficulties in Iraq initially stemmed from agreement more than disagreement. That Vietnam greatly shaped the perspectives of the military leaders of the 1980s and 1990s, is now conventional wisdom. In the last three decades of the twentieth century, the U.S. Army or its mainstream, turned away from Vietnam and anything associated with counterinsurgency. There have been many books and articles about the military's, and especially the Army's, reluctance to get involved any operation other than Desert Storm-like war. This resistance became so intense that in the Clinton Administration, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright famously said to General Powell, "What's the point of having this superb military you are always talking about if we can't use it."¹²

Many readers are probably thinking that the diverse shaping experiences of military officers and the management of the resulting disagreements are nothing new. This is true. Military leadership doctrine has long addressed the importance of building consensus, especially by organizational and strategic leaders. The new Army Field Manual 5-0, The Operation Process, defines dialog as "a way to collaborate that involved candid exchange of ideas or opinions among participants that encourages frank discussions in areas of disagreement." It goes on to affirm that "effective collaboration includes continuous dialog that leads to increased understanding of the situation." The new FM 5.0 also describes ill-defined problems as those where even professionals will disagree on the nature and definition of the problem. And thus, there must be extensive dialogue and debate on defining the problem before ever considering to solutions.¹³

¹² Michael Dobbs, *Madeleine Albright: A Twentieth-Century Odyssey*, 360.

¹³ Army Field Manual (FM) 5-0, The Operation Process, March 2010, 1-6, 2-4, 3-2

Again, my main point is that Cohen's unequal dialogue is not simply an aspect of civil-military relations; it is a central feature of military life and therefore must be at the heart of our professional ethic. However, incorporating this into our professional behavior is not simply a matter of listing principles or rules. I think our professional ethics are shaped by thousands of experiences, sharpened by tough cases that provide substance if not rigorous consistency, and reflect ambiguity as well as clarity. So, now let me turn to some examples of civil-military and military to military unequal dialogues from the surge in Iraq.

UNEQUAL DIALOGUES FROM THE IRAQ "SURGE"

The Iraq "surge" decision is a distinctive event in the history of civil-military relations. In deciding on the new strategy for Iraq, President Bush overruled the recommendations of virtually the entire military chain of command--General Casey, General Abizaid, General Pace and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Yet, military opinion was not unanimous and civilian proponents of the surge tapped alternate sources on military advice and expertise. Again reflecting American historical experience, we see civil-military factions versus other civil-military factions. Moreover, understanding how national security decisions are made when military experts disagree is a central question of the "unequal civil-military dialogue." These episodes also provide grist for the consideration of the unequal professional dialogue.

The Iraq Study Group

The bipartisan study commission is hardly perennial in American government. It has been a very common form of civil-military dialogue. For example, in the nineteenth century, Congress, either directly or indirectly through the executive department-lead commissions, would undertake broad studies of military or security policy--notably on Indian policy and coastal defense. Commonly, all of the generals of the army would be asked to provide their opinions.

These statements were generally independent of the official War Department positions. Thus, the Iraq Study Group follows a long line of political-military inquiries.

Formed in March 2006 at the behest of Congress and the reluctant acquiescence of the Bush Administration, the primary members of the Iraq Study Group (ISG) were prominent political figures, headed by former Secretary of State James Baker and former Congressman Lee Hamilton. It also included future Defense Secretary Robert Gates. The ISG's Military Senior Advisor Panel consisted of retired flag officers: Admiral James O. Ellis, Jr., General Edward C. Meyer, General Joseph W. Ralston, Lieutenant General Roger C. Schultz, Sr., and most significantly General John M. Keane. Like previous such commissions, the ISG interviewed many other active and retired officers.

Typically, the ISG final report reflected political consensus-building and compromise. It reinforced the prevailing conventional wisdom that the primary objective should be withdrawal not success in Iraq. Some members like Gates were apparently supportive of troop increases, but others leaning in that direction were dissuaded by Iraq commanders George Casey and Peter Chiarelli who insisted that increased troops were neither sustainable nor effective in the long term.¹⁴

It is perhaps not surprising that the recommendations of bipartisan commissions tend to reflect conventional wisdom or divide into more passionate majority and minority reports. In many ways they become political theater and its public, almost ritualistic, character does not

¹⁴ Tom Ricks, *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006-2008*, 53-54. Feaver wryly concludes that the ISG report has little influence except to demonstrate that if the existing Casey approach were relabeled as anti-Bush, it could achieve bipartisan support. Feaver, "The Right to Be Right: Civil-Military Relations and the Surge," 31-32. The ISG's final report was released in December 6, 2006. It consisted of a lengthy list of recommendations, some of which were already being implemented, but the overall thrust was to increase diplomatic and political efforts while beginning a phased U.S. military withdrawal. It rejected the options of: Precipitate Withdrawal, Staying the Course, More Troops for Iraq, and Devolution into Three Regions. It did recommend increases in trainers and imbeds for the Iraqi security forces and acknowledged the possible need for a small, temporary troop increases for Baghdad, but nothing the size of the eventually surge decision.

necessarily produce a candid, much less blunt civil-military dialogue. Like testifying before Congress, military testimony before bipartisan commissions produces a dilemma. How far can or should an officer go in offering views that conflict with the policies of the commander-in-chief. General Petraeus's May 2006 testimony provides a good example of the pulled punches of such venues. Petraeus reportedly said "U.S. strategy over the last 18 months has been sound." "I would not break up the team of military and civilian leaders currently in Iraq." He acknowledged that Iraq was "the most challenging security environment he had seen in 31 years in the military," and like Casey and Abizaid, he stressed political reconciliation. Echoing what had become the bipartisan "party-line," the problem could not be solved militarily. "It had to be solved politically."¹⁵

National Security Advisor.

By the summer of 2006, National Security Advisor, Stephen Hadley and key aides like Meghan O'Sullivan recognized that the existing strategy was not succeeding and something needed to be done. Given the approaching elections, Hadley moved cautiously in launching a new strategy review. Initially, this was the review was confined to a few trusted civilian aides, although it did include National Security Council staffer Brigadier General Kevin Bergner. Hadley did not bring the Joint Chiefs of Staff or Multination Forces -Iraq (MNF-I) directly into the review, but instead elicited their views by requesting answers to a lengthy list assumptions and questions and through video conferences. By October, Hadley had merged a State Department team into his review effort. On 11 October, retired navy captain, Dr. William Luti, submitted a primarily military plan to Hadley's deputy, J.D Crouch. Luti's plan called for surging about five brigades to primarily to Baghdad, assigning the mission of "secure and hold,"

¹⁵ Woodward, *The War Within*, 43-45.

eradicating both AQ and Shia militias, and increasing the Army and Marine Corps end strength. Hadley forwarded this plan to General Pace for assessment.¹⁶

Peter Feaver, a member of the NSC staff, maintains that Hadley was the driving force behind the ultimate surge decision. Rather than devising plan and forcing it through the system, Hadley and the NSC brought the various governmental departments along gradually. For example, they avoided a situation in which all of the departments brought their options to the table for an up or down decision by the President. Instead, they first changed the mission priority from “train and transition” to “population protection.” The civilian-led process reached out to various military individuals and factions sympathetic to counterinsurgency and a new direction. And finally, after having their say senior generals acquiesced slowly, reluctantly.¹⁷

JCS Council of Colonels.

By the fall, other departments were conducting their own quiet reviews. For the purposes of this paper, the JCS review is the most relevant. The impetus for the JCS review may have been a meeting between Rumsfeld, Pace and retired General Jack Keane on 19 September. According to Tom Ricks, at that meeting, Keane forcefully argued five points. First, the insurgency could not be defeated simply by attacking them or transitioning that job to the Iraqi forces. Second, the only way to win was to protect the people and isolate the insurgents from the people. Third, stop running patrols out of big bases and start living among the people. Four, stop talking about drawing down troop levels. Finally, get some new generals. Although, Rumsfeld and Keane had had a excellent relationship--Rumsfeld had urged Keane to become Army Chief of Staff--Rumsfeld was not persuaded. A few days later Pace met with Keane.

¹⁶ Woodward, *The War Within*, 60-1, 73-4, 170-1. Peter D. Feaver, "The Right to Be Right: Civil-Military Relations and the Surge," 23-4. Michael Gordon, "Troop 'Surge' Took Place Amid Doubt and Debate," *New York Times*, August 13, 2008.

¹⁷ Feaver, "The Right to Be Right: Civil-Military Relations and the Surge," 31-7.

Keane critiqued Pace's hands-off approach to Iraq. Keane also repeated his conviction that new leaders were needed. He suggested that ADM Fallon replace Abizaid and Petraeus replace Casey.¹⁸

General Pace apparently took Keane's admonishment to heart and quickly formed a study group of 16 officers, dubbed the "Council of Colonels." Initially, General Pace and Lieutenant General Walter Sharp, director of the Joint Staff gave the colonels a rather broad charter: reexamine everything regarding the global war on terrorism. Gradually they focused on the "800 pound gorillas in the room--Iraq."¹⁹ Ultimately, this group proved to have little influence on policy or strategy. The "council of colonels" proved to be just as divided as the rest of the government and the military. While former commanders in Iraq, Army colonels Peter Mansoor and H. R. McMaster and Marine colonel Tim Greenwood supported changing the mission to "population protection" and a substantial increase of forces. The Navy and Air force officers were "anti-surge." Their recommendation of a small troop increase suggests compromise and was not very different from the final recommendation of George Casey, which Pace and the JCS had been inclined to support from the beginning.²⁰

Keane and the American Enterprise Institute

Outside of Stephan Hadley and the NSC, the most influential civil-military faction in the surge decision proved to be the most unusual. Scholars at the American Enterprise Institute, and especially Frederick Kagan had generally supported the invasion of Iraq, but were appalled at the resultant troubles. Kagan, a military historian and former West Point professor, had been pressing for troop increase for some time. On the weekend of 9-10 December invited a group of

¹⁸ Ricks, *The Gamble*, 88-90. Woodward, *The War Within*, 141-46.

¹⁹ The group was composed of three from the Marine Corps,, four from the Army, four from the Navy, and five from the Air Force. Woodward, *The War Within*, 158-59.

²⁰ Ricks, *The Gamble*, 88-90, 101-04.

scholars and retired officers to participate in a war game of what a surge might be able to accomplish. This exercise would be the basis for a report to counter the Iraq Study Group recommendations. Among the scholars were: Frederick Kagan, his wife Kimberly, Danielle Pletka, Thomas Donnelly, Rend al-Rahim, and Michael Rubin. Among the retired officers were: General Jack Keane, Lieutenant General David Barno, Colonel Joel Armstrong, and Major Daniel Dwyer.²¹

The AEI plan is remarkable for its quality, detail, and accuracy. Dr. Kagan had taught at West Point with fellow historian H.R. McMaster, and Tom Ricks claims that there were unnamed active duty officers, affiliated with H.R McMaster also in attendance at the exercise. He goes on to surmise that McMaster's operations at Tall Afar were the model for the AEI Plan. The plan that resulted from this exercise proposed specific forces, deployment locations, missions, and concepts of operation. It clearly explained why five brigades were needed and how they could be employed. It also forthrightly turned the political-military assumption of the campaign on its head--improved security would lead to a breakthrough on political reconciliation. Even General Keane, who had access to classified information, was impressed with the quality of analysis from open sources.²²

Maybe by coincidence, Jack Keane was scheduled to meet with the President and the Vice President the next day. Keane's weekend at AEI would have certainly given him even greater ammunition and confidence in his recommendations. The 11 December 2006 meeting in the White House was another extraordinary civil-military dialogue. Attendees included Dr. Eliot Cohen, then counselor to the Secretary of State, Dr. Stephen Biddle of Council on Foreign

²¹ Frederick W. Kagan, "Choosing Victory: A Plan for Success in Iraq, Phase I Report," A Report of the Iraq Planning Group at the American Enterprise Institute, January 5, 2007.

²² Ricks, *The Gamble*, 94-98. Woodward, *The War Within*, 276-78. "Choosing Victory." AEI Interim Report, December 14, 2006. Frederick W. Kagan, "Choosing Victory: A Plan for Success in Iraq, Phase I Report," A Report of the Iraq Planning Group at the American Enterprise Institute, January 5, 2007.

Relations, and retired generals, Barry McCaffrey, Wayne Downing, and Jack Keane. Cohen urged a more aggressive strategy and a new team in Iraq. Next, Keane empathically advocated a robust surge and new command team in Iraq. McCaffrey and Downing both disagreed with Keane and argued that escalation was not sustainable and produce little lasting effect. Instead they urged more effort and resources in training the Iraqi security forces. Dr. Biddle also believed that adding more troops was the only option that offered a chance of "turning things around." Both Bush and Cheney still seemed to play their cards close to their chest, but after the meeting, as Cheney walked to his office with Keane, General McCaffrey thought the "fix was in." Woodward reports that the AEI plan that Keane showed the vice president was very persuasive.²³

The President and the JCS.

Two days after meeting with the outside experts, President Bush came to the Pentagon to hear the views of the JCS. Again according to Bob Woodward, the president came armed with "sweeteners" including a promise to increase the size of the Army and Marine Corps. As the president pressed them on what could be done to improve the security situation in Iraq, the JCS first urged that the president get commitments of action and support from Prime Minister Malicki. Regarding a surge of up five brigades, they warned that this constituted the nation's strategic reserve and that the military would be unable to readily respond to a crisis elsewhere. The president indicated that he was more concerned about the current war than a hypothetical one. Army Chief of Staff Schoomaker advised that deployment tours would need to be extended and more Reserve and National Guard units would need to be called up. When Schoomaker suggested that a surge might break the force, the President asked the Chiefs which was more

²³ Ricks, *The Gamble*, 98-101. Woodward, *The War Within*, 279-82. Frederick W. Kagan and Jack Keane, "The Right Type of 'Surge'; Any Troop Increase Must Be Large and Lasting," *Washington Post*, December 27, 2006.

likely to break the force, a humiliating defeat or sustaining the surge over the next few years. The Chiefs acknowledged that defeat would be more damaging.²⁴

At one point, the army chief opined that generating the surge force would take time and expressed doubt that the president had the time, meaning the political time. There are several versions of the president response, but essentially the president indicated that in his political assessment, he had the time. Although the president had told them he had not yet made his decision, Woodward concludes that the joint chiefs had "sniffed him out." The president favored a surge.²⁵

If General Schoomaker's intrusion into the political sphere was a breach of protocol, I submit it was a minor one. The question of the political time necessary to conduct the surge was not a trivial matter. That the army chief raised the concern showed he had some sense of the political pressure under which the Commander in Chief was working. Moreover, Schoomaker, in bringing up the issue, did not insist that his political judgment was superior to the president's. The blunt "unequal dialogue" should permit the military to challenge political assumptions or objectives, as in the example of Colin Powell I cited earlier. However, by no means should the military be permitted to reject or ignore political judgments or objectives.

One final point about this meeting. Although the JCS believed the president had already decided on the surge, Bush indicated that he was only leaning that way, "but the door wasn't shut." At a SOCOM OIF After Action Review in 2003, Special Forces Colonel Patrick Higgins observed that politicians like to play their cards close to their chest and make their final decisions only when they must. Even if they are leaning in a certain direction, they like to leave their

²⁴ Woodward, *The War Within*, 287-89. Feaver, "The Right to Be Right: Civil-Military Relations and the Surge," 29.

²⁵ Woodward, *The War Within*, 287-89. Peter Feaver suggests the president's response to Schoomaker political assessment may have been a bit more pointed. Feaver, "The Right to Be Right: Civil-Military Relations and the Surge," 29.

options open to the last possible minute. In contrast, the military are "planful" and make decisions as soon as possible so others can get on with their planning. This difference frustrates and confuses the military.

Keane on Pace

While the civil-military dynamics of the surge decision-making process offer illustrations of the unequal civil-military dialogue, other episodes provide interesting insights of the military professional dialogue. In *The War Within*, Woodward recounts how around Christmas 2006 Jack Keane received a call from a major general in the JCS J3. The general informed Keane that General Casey's surge recommendation for two army brigades and two marine battalions had arrived and that he was going to advise Chairman Pace that this would not work. Later the general called back and said that Pace's response was, "I don't want to know that. I don't want to hear it won't work. I want you to tell me how to sell this at Crawford." [The Bush ranch was the site of next NSC meeting on 28 December.] Keane's apparent response to that was to dismiss Pace as a sycophant who was letting down the people in uniform and fighting in combat. Keane concluded that Pace was hiding behind Abizaid and Casey, using them "to protect himself." Keane immediately called John Hannah, Vice President Cheney's national security advisor to declare the Casey recommendation was "wholly inadequate."²⁶

Peter Feaver has a very different perspective on the role played by Chairman Pace. Feaver explains how important Pace was in reconciling Casey and the JCS as the President's views on Iraq strategy shifted. Pace had three somewhat conflicting roles: advisor to the president, advisor to the Secretary of Defense, and principle advocate for the views of the JCS and combatant commanders. As Feaver notes, "Pace did not oppose the surge in the same way

²⁶ Woodward, *The War Within*, 297-99. The J3 general was probably was MG Michael Barbero, J33. Ricks, *The Gamble*, 80.

that the Chiefs and the combatant commanders did, but he was cautious and focused on devising a decision-making process that would bring the military along with the evolving views of his Commander-in-Chief." I would add that the varying political roles a Chairman must play are not well understood.²⁷

Casey Obstructs Petraeus.

On 2 January 2007, JCS Chairman Peter Pace, according to Bob Woodward, informed then Lieutenant General Petraeus that he had been selected as General Casey's successor in Iraq. This was eight days before President would announce the "surge" strategy. Shortly afterward, Pace called to ask how many brigades he would need. Petraeus asked if he could first call Lieutenant General Ray Odierno, the corps commander in Iraq. Pace said OK and Petraeus got Odierno's recommendation of deploying all five available brigades. Meanwhile, General Casey remained opposed to five more brigades, but had been cautioned a week earlier by General Abizaid: "Look, the surge is coming. Get out of the way." When Casey found out that Petraeus had talked to Odierno directly, he called Petraeus and chastised him for calling his subordinates. Petraeus explained that he had been asked for his views and since he would have to execute what was eventually decided, he needed to speak with the operational ground commander. The incoming commander then asked if he could "start getting some briefings and things."

According to Woodward, "Casey said no."²⁸

"You're Not Accountable"

Casey's unhappiness did not end when he left Iraq. Again, Bob Woodward reports that in the summer of 2007, GEN Casey ran into Jack Keane at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

²⁷ Feaver, "The Right to Be Right: Civil-Military Relations and the Surge," 35-6. Tom Ricks suggests that Pace took a somewhat hands-off approach to Iraq because he could focus on the rest of the world, while two four stars were "on the case" in Iraq. Ricks, *The Gamble*, 88.

²⁸ Bob Woodward, *The War Within*, 310,306.

Casey greeted Keane and inquired if the Chairman of the JCS had called him yet. Keane responded no and asked why. Casey replied: "Because we feel -- the chiefs feel -- that you are way too out in front advocating a policy for which you're not accountable. We're accountable. You're not accountable, Jack. And that's a problem." Keane responded the he was as a member of the Secretary Defense Policy Board he was supposed to offer independent advice and all he was trying to do was help Petraeus. Unlike others, he had supported the Abizaid/Casey strategy for years. "And at some point, I no longer could support it. I'm not operating as some kind of Lone Ranger." Casey reiterated, "It's not appropriate for a retired general to be so far forward advocating a policy that he is not responsible or accountable for." Keane did not agree.²⁹

Later, Keane, again according to Bob Woodward, had "heard through the Pentagon grapevine" that the new JCS Chairman, ADM Mike Mullen, "had told colleagues that one of his first plans was to "get Keane back in the box." Keane went to see the chairman. In the meeting Mullen told Keane, "I don't want you going to Iraq anymore and helping Petraeus." "You've diminished the office of the chairman of the Joint Chief." Eventually getting the heart of the issue, Keane remarked that, "to the degree that you're putting pressure on Petraeus to reduce forces, you're taking far too much risk, and that risk is in losing and not winning." Mullen did not agree. When the Pentagon denied Keane's country clearance, Keane contacted the Vice President's office, and soon Secretary Gates received notes supporting Keane's visits to Iraq to advise GEN Petraeus. One note was from the Vice President and the other was from the President.³⁰

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PROFESSIONAL MILITARY ETHIC

²⁹ Bob Woodward, "You're Not Accountable, Jack," *Washington Post*, September 9, 2008, A01; Bob Woodward, *The War Within*, 371.

³⁰ Bob Woodward, "You're Not Accountable, Jack," *Washington Post*, September 9, 2008, A01; Bob Woodward, *The War Within*, 399.

Pervasiveness of Politics

So what do these stories tell us about “unequal dialogues” and the professional military ethic? One of the first implications is the pervasiveness of politics. As I stated earlier, politics is about how groups make decisions and thus it is endemic to the military profession. All officers swim in some kind of political pond, lake, or ocean. Whether conducting stability operations, contingency planning, or systems acquisition, there is a political dimension to the job. Political and military affairs are inextricably linked and the boundaries are sometimes unclear. Thus, no elected leader would grant discretionary authority to the military if he did not have confidence they understood the political implications of military operations.

In arguing that officers become more politically aware or sensitive, I am not saying they should be more politically partisan. In fact I believe just the opposite. Military advice visibly influenced by partisanship becomes partisan advice. Partisan advice undermines the credibility of the profession. Thus, the politics of the professional military ethic demands that the officer adopt the habit of political impartiality. Regardless of his personal views, the officer must demonstrate that his professional analysis has seriously considered all sides of an issue. An officer's advice may end up supporting the position of one political faction or another, but it always be based on clearly and fairly articulated professional considerations.

Retired Officers

This leads me to the question of retired military officers and the professional ethic. First and foremost, I believe that retired officers remain part of the military profession. Second, they serve as valuable teachers and mentors to the active military. While George Casey objected to Jack Keane's relationship with Peter Petraeus, it did not stop him from seeking the advice of such

retired officers as Shy Meyer.³¹ Third, retired officers serve as valuable advisors and sounding boards to political leaders. Retired generals Barry McCaffrey and Wayne Downing had been providing military advice to both the Clinton and Bush administrations. My few examples contained only a small number of those engaged in educating and advising our political leadership. Finally, retired officers can serve as invaluable teachers, translators, and interpreters to the American public. They do not always have the same constraints of active duty professionals.

Fewer constraints do not mean no constraints. Retired generals are citizens and have a right to speak, but they must also remember their obligations as a military professional. If political activism and partisanship on the part of the military, active or retired, convinces our elected leaders that the selection of senior military officers should be treated no differently from any other political appointment, our professional status and credibility will be destroyed.

Administrations will demand personal and political loyalty and incoming administrations will remove incumbent generals to make way for their own “loyalists.” Just as federal prosecutors are routinely replaced at the Department of Justice and judges must pass through political filters, the selection and promotion of generals could become overtly political.

Candor and Civility

My chief disappointment about the so-called “revolt of the generals” in 2006 was that it became too personal, too simplistic, too partisan. It obscured or ignored the tremendous complexities and difficulties decision-makers faced. The generals presented one-sided philippics rather than a reasoned analysis. They attacked Secretary Rumsfeld’s motives and patriotism. They claimed a monopoly on wisdom rather than presenting the alternatives facing the Secretary and

³¹ David Cloud and Greg Jaffe, *The Fourth Star: Four Generals and the Epic Struggle for the Future of the United States Army*, 268-69.

explain why his decisions were wrong. While emotionally satisfying for some, they attacks distracted us from the open professional analysis and the candid professional judgment we owe our elected leaders and the American people.

Thus, another implication for the professional dialogue is the need for candid and respectful debate. Respect and candor go together. Candor is a sign of respect; a sign of trust. In the past few decades, we have seen punditry replace serious analysis, insult replace argument, accusation replace evidence. Calling people who disagree sycophants, yes-men, dilettantes, idiots, cowards, or criminals is uncivil, but more importantly it's unprofessional. Name calling does not necessarily make one's own position any more accurate or wise. Even in private, a military professional should refrain from attacking another's motives and character. Perhaps more common than name-calling and contempt is the use of hyperbole and sarcasm in the professional dialogue. Hyperbole is merely another way to over-simplify complex subjects and sarcasm or ridicule a different technique to avoid engaging with the real argument. Exaggeration and disdain do little to advance a genuine debate and produce true understanding, much less agreement.

Transparency

The next implication for the professional military ethic I would like to discuss is the matter of accountability or responsibility. While I think it was legitimate for General Schoomaker to raise the question of political time and the surge, George Bush was correct to point out that it was his decision and he would be held accountable, ultimately. George Casey was quite right that as a joint force commander and Chief of Staff of the Army, he was accountable in a way that a retired general like Jack Keane was not. Certainly General Casey's decisions have greater direct impact than General Keane's recommendations. Yet all officers of

the government--civil or military, commander or staff officer-- must be responsible for their conduct and accountable for their recommendations or decisions. Whether a retired advisor or a staff officer for General Cohn, all military professionals must remain accountable for the quality, candor, and fair-mindedness of their professional actions. These are the basis for professional reputation and professional credibility.

However, rather than focusing on relative accountability and authority, I would like to approach the issue from a slightly different direction--that of transparency. If our professional ethic demands a candid and fair-minded analysis, the professional dialogue requires an open or transparent debate. A transparent debate does not necessarily mean a public debate. A transparent debate is one in which the participants openly and fairly share their information, opinions, and recommendations. Professionals should be willing, even eager, to explain and defend their positions without stifling or stigmatizing opposing points of view. The professional dialogue demands a fair, even if unequal, debate.

A transparent debate need not begin with all interested parties. It may legitimately begin with a select group such as Hadley's national security team or Pace's council of colonels developing an organizational perspective or position. Yet ultimately, these participants must include all the relevant parties. Thus, when the JCS J33 informed Jack Keane of GEN Casey's two brigade- two battalion recommendation, I contend that he may have been a partisan, but he was also maintaining the transparency of the debate among authorized participants, because by that time Keane had a recognized role in the civil-military dialogue concerning strategy in Iraq. On the other hand, I submit that General Casey's effort to restrict General Petraeus access to key personal and information directly relevant to his impending assignment was not furthering transparency of dialogue and debate.

The attempt by ADM Mullen to block Keane visiting and advising Petraeus and Odierno was another breach of transparency. Certainly Mullen and many of the JCS were irritated with what they regarded as interference with the chain of command. Tom Ricks argues that Jack Keane had become the defacto Chairman of the JCS. But Mullen's authority as Chairman ultimately depends on his credibility as an advisor to the Secretary and President. Controlling information and access are the weapons of the bureaucrat, not the professional, whose real power resides in the quality and persuasiveness of his advice and the trust that advice engenders.

I also believe that the transparency, and accountability, of the professional dialogue requires that most of it be on the record. Of course, there are times when some things should not go on the record such as when General Pace asked Keane of his opinion on Pace's performance. However as a historian, I am a frustrated, and a bit appalled, at the amount of political-military decision-making that is being conducted with no record. As useful as Bob Woodward can be, I would much rather have the minutes of the NSC meetings than the filtered memories of self-interested participants. After all, are we not all the heroes of our own stories and thus selectively recall events from our own perspective.

There is also something to be said for formalized bureaucratic processes. I recall listening to a speech by a former JCS J-5 who took Defense Under Secretary Richard Armitage to task for "short circuiting" the policy process by inviting J-5 staffers to participant in OSD working group meetings. The general's point was that these staff officers could not and did not represent the views of the JCS, because the JCS had not yet considered the issue or formulated recommendations. Jack Keane's back channel efforts give me similar concern. Yet, Keane did not invent this situation. I regret that modern decision-makers are leaving fewer and fewer

fingerprints and that there will enormous gaps in the record of our national security and the military decision-making process. This is bad for accountability and transparency.

Many old hands, wise in the ways of bureaucracy, will regard my appeal for transparency as naïve. There is some justice to this charge. After all, the control and manipulation of information has been with us since scribes first put styli to clay tablets. Our competitive culture, and especially our adversary legal system, constantly reinforces that idea there are winners and losers. Military professionals are probably more competitive than most; losing an argument is nearly as unbearable as losing a war. But ethical principles and codes are not based on the lowest plane of practice, but the higher reaches of our ideals. Moreover, many military values--obedience, collectivism, readiness to kill--frequently conflict with the values of the larger society. Our insistence on transparent and fair-minded professional dialogue may not be always reciprocated, but I that should not stop us a adhering to our own professional values. In the long run, I believe it will breed trust.

Private and Public Dialogue

A transparent dialogue can be both public and private. One of the striking aspects of the surge dialogue was the relative absence of leaking by the various participants. While there was some contemporary reporting and participants were surely leaking to Bob Woodward, there was no damaging battle of leak and counter leak that had marred earlier strategic debates. The public deliberation generated by the ISG process may have provided cover for the private, internal debates. Leaking is not about transparent debate. It is taking the debate to a different venue. It is the almost unvaryingly calculating, selective, and manipulative. It is destructive to genuine dialogue. During the run up to the Iraq war, genuine dialogue within the Bush administration was short-circuited by leaks. For example, Secretary Rumsfeld would not let cabinet officers

keep copies of the Iraq war planning briefings because he did not trust his colleagues because he had seen too many such documents given to the media within hours. The behavior of both Rumsfeld and his colleagues greatly damaged the nation.

While much of our unequal professional dialogue must be done in private, there is a vital public dimension to as well. While much of the public debate about Iraq became partisan, vituperative, and destructive, the dialogue in military professional publications and journals remained civil, constructive, and professional. Since 2001, the Army War College and the Command and General Staff College have produced many trenchant analyses and critiques of policy, strategy, tactics and techniques. The ability that the military has shown to regroup, rethink, and retrain itself to conduct stability operations, to successfully counter insurgents is remarkable. The American military demonstrated a tremendous ability to adapt. The American people are rightly proud of the courage and discipline their soldiers display on the battlefield. They can be equally reassured by the intellectual energy displayed in forging new expert knowledge and skills. The "surge" would not have been successful without both the hard-won combat experience and creative professionalism of the American military.

Humility and Trust

In conclusion, I would like to make one final point about the unequal civil-military dialogue and the unequal professional dialogue. They both require humility. Experts need to teach, yet professionals must continuously learn. Military expertise can never be taken for granted and it is not simply the product of experience. The military profession will always face new and different challenges that require new solutions and the forging of new areas of expertise. A professional should never fear testing, proving, improving that expertise. As much as we might lament it, we do not possess a monopoly on national security knowledge or expertise. We

must expect to be constantly challenged by other national security experts and political leaders. If professional expertise is the product of lifelong learning, then a military professional should value learning from others. Challenging professional dialogues and debates are as important in professional fitness as physical training. All leaders--civilian and military, senior and junior--benefit from such encounters.

Finally, the military profession depends on trust. Trust is the central civil-military relationship and the fundamental bond among soldiers. Trust begins with a shared commitment to service. It requires mutual respect and understanding. Society does not grant the military discretionary authority without trust and the military does not delegate authority without trust. Bias or partisanship taints professional expertise and advice and undermines trust. Any meaningful and candid unequal dialogue ultimately depends on trust.

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